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The Attitudes of Serbian Public Toward the Army and Defence

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Introductory remarks

On the basis of a project and questionnaire developed by the Centre for Civil-Military Relations, a Belgrade NGO, the Centre for Politicological Research and Public Opinion of the Belgrade Institute of Social Sciences, in the period from March 3 until 10, 2001, conducted a survey using its standard representative sample of 1680 Serbian citizens. The survey was carried out in 105 local communities on the territory of Serbia excluding Kosovo and Metohija, picked at random.

The Institute used a stratified three-tier quota sample. On level one, the proportions of the region were defined. For instance, the sub-sample for Vojvodina included the regions of Bačka, Banat and Srem. On level two, municipalities were picked at random, and the probability of their choice depended on the size of their population. Level three was used to select local communities applying the same principle but this time on the municipalities concerned, again on the basis of cumulative frequencies. The quota criteria included the stratum (urban and other settlements), sex, age and education of respondents, based on the 1991 census, as corrected by demographic projections.

The sample is fairly representative of the adult population of Serbia with respect to sex (50% male and female each), age groups (21% under the age of 30, 19% between 30 and 39, 18% between 40 and 49, 17% between 50 and 59 and 25% over 60), shares of urban population (57%) and nationalities (Serbs 81%, Hungarians 7%, Yugoslavs 3%, Muslims 2%, Roma 2%, Croats 1%, Montenegrins 1% and 4% others), education (41% with or without elementary school, 45% with worker qualifications or 4-year secondary schools and 14% of higher-school and university graduates).

The possible error with the kind of sample used in this survey is up to 3% for dichotomous variables.

The questionnaire, among other things, included questions related to the security and defence of the country, the role of the army in the political system, Yugoslav Army (YA) organisation and its approach to defence integrations in the region and Europe, human rights in the YA and a number of others. Views on issues related to the internal life of the YA and the respect for human rights in the service were provided by a sub-sample of respondents who served their term in the army or were commanding officers in it. The sub-sample comprised 698 respondents, which is quite sufficient to draw reliable conclusions.

The survey findings also allow us to draw conclusions on certain matters of the defence and the army the public had no previous opportunity to judge for a number of reasons including e.g. the extraordinary circumstances prevailing in the country over the past ten years and the special position the army has traditionally enjoyed in this society. The recent about turn requires appropriate changes in this respect, in order to enable the public to state its views on as large as possible number of questions related to the security and defence as well as on the army which is supposed to provide that.

1. Whether to change our defence policy

After all negative experiences from the confrontation with the whole world and failed attempts to solve contemporary political and Serbian national problems by military force, it is well justified to ask the citizens of Serbia whether anything should be changed in our policy of defence.

Table 1

After the electoral victory of the DOS, the position of the FRY in Europe and in the world has substantially changed. Do you think that in accordance with that our defence policy should be changed or not?

	Number	Percent
1. Yes	856	51,4
2. No	355	21,3
3. Does not know	455	27,3
Total	1666	100,0

As the Table 1 shows, the absolute majority (51,4%) of the Serbian public opinion deems that the policy of defence of the country should be changed. The result demonstrates the willingness of the majority of the public in Serbia to give support to the reforms in the area of defense.

The age of the respondents has exerted regular and noticeable influence on their responses. The older the respondents the more prone they are to support the status quo in this respect. While 58,1% of the respondents younger than 30 deem that the defence policy should be changed, the corresponding percent of the older than 60 is 38,9%.

2. In which direction to change the policy of defense

By the next question the respondents were asked in which direction to undertake the necessary changes. The respondents were offered the most probable

By the next question the respondents were asked in which direction to undertake the necessary changes. The respondents were offered the most probable options and had to decide among them.

Table 2

Which of the following best expresses your opinion about the need for the changes of our defence policy?

1. It is necessary to strengthen military-political alliance with Russia and rely on its aid in defence of the FRY	47	5,5
2. It is necessary to integrate gradually into broader European defence integrations, and first of all into PfP Partnership for Peace	643	74,9
3. It is necessary to prepare for joining NATO	106	12,4
4. Something else	8	0,9
5. Does not know	54	6,3
Total	858	100,0

Substantial majority of the respondents (74,9%) who assessed that the changes in the defence policy should be undertaken considers that they should take direction toward a gradual inclusion into European defensive integrations, and first of all into PfP. The percentage (12,4%) of those who consider it necessary to prepare for joining NATO is not negligible. Other options attracted much fewer respondents. It is interesting that very few respondents chose the option of strengthening the alliance with Russia – traditional friend and ally of the Serb people. It would not be advisable to draw conclusions on the basis of one public opinion poll, but probably some members of the public became disillusioned by the Russian inability to prevent the NATO intervention in 1999.

The age of the respondents shows influence on their answers – somewhat lesser than with the previous question. While 3,8% of the youngest respondents plead for strengthening alliance with Russia, corresponding percentage for the oldest amounts to 12,9%. In favor of European integrations and PfP membership 76,0% of the youngest opt, and 63,2% of the oldest respondents. That response is the most frequently chosen by the respondents in the age of 40 to 49 years (85,7%). The option preparation for the NATO membership is the most frequently chosen by the respondents of the age up to 29 (14,9%) and from 30 to 39 years (16,0%).

In another poll of the public opinion in Serbia, on the same sample, carried out at the beginning of June 2001, the citizens were asked a similar question. Due to somewhat different wording of the question the answers slightly varied, but 'Eurocentric' orientation prevailed.

Table 2a

What is your attitude toward future policy of defence of the FRY?

1. Keep independent position like until now and rely primarily on own forces	20
2. Strengthen alliance with Russia and rely on its aid in the field of defence	5
3. Start joining European defence alliances (PfP, NATO)	43
4. Disarmament and neutrality of the country	10
5. Does not know, can not appraise, no answer	22

Among the alternative offered options relating to the planning of the defence policy of the country pleading for accession to European defensive alliances – PfP and even NATO (43%) prevailed. The difference with the previous question was obviously caused by the fact that NATO was included together with PfP.

One fifth of the citizens were not able to choose some of the options. All in all, it could be said that the nation is divided in this respect. In relation to the answers obtained on a similar question posed in the autumn 2000, there are small but indicative differences. Though the attitude toward the inclusion into

European alliances was the same, the percentage of those who opted for independence was a little higher (25%), and also the percentage of those who opted for the alliance with Russia (8%)¹.

The common denominator for both polls is that, in spite of the years long anti-western propaganda and the NATO armed intervention in 1999, the majority of citizens consider that the solution of the problems of the state's defence should be sought in a kind of European security integration.

3. How to develop the Army of Yugoslavia

In connection with the need for further transformation of the Army of Yugoslavia, the respondents were asked to assess that question.

Table 3

Having in mind new political conditions in our country, in the region and in Europe, how should, to your opinion, the Army of Yugoslavia (AY) be developed further?

1. Keep the Army on the present level of strength and size, and modernize it in accordance with the possibilities of the society	497	29,8
2. Downsize the Army and modernize it in accordance with the possibilities of the society	950	57,0
3. Create separate republican armies under a joint command	24	1,4
4. Abolish the AY because the need for it has ceased	27	1,6
5. Something else	18	1,1
6. Does not know	152	9,1
Total	1668	100,0

The public of Serbia is aware of all limitations with which the country is faced and has a realistic view on the prospects of the army and defence. The absolute majority of the respondents (57,0%) opt for reduction in size of the army and its modernization in accordance with the economic possibilities of the society. The percentage of the respondents who would like to have a strong and sizeable army is not negligible – 29,8 %, which is fully in line with Serbian traditions and stereotypes.

The influence of the age of respondents on their answers

Table 3a

Having in mind new political conditions in our country, in the region and in Europe, how should, to your opinion, the Army of Yugoslavia (AY) be developed further?

	18-29 years	30-39 years	40-49 years	50-59 years	60 and more	Average
1. Keep the Army on the present level of strength and size, and modernize it in accordance with the possibilities of the society	24.4	22.9	27.3	33.3	38.9	29.7
2. Downsize the Army and modernize it in accordance with the possibilities of the society	62.5	64.9	64.0	59.4	42.5	57.1
3. Create separate republican armies under a	2.0	1.6	2.4	1.4	0.2	1.4